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The Inviting Approach 55

Teacher Behaviors

Earlier the idea was presented that each professional has the ability and responsibility to function in a professionally inviting manner. However, it is possible for a message, no matter how well-meaning, to be perceived as disinviting. Attractive or repellent qualities remain in the eyes of the beholder. There is no guarantee that the most well-intentioned actions will be viewed positively by others.

Numerous classification systems have been developed for categorizing messages. The classification system that fits the approach presented in this book involves the following four categories: *Level One*, intentionally disinviting; *Level Two*, unintentionally disinviting; *Level Three*, unintentionally inviting; and *Level Four*, intentionally inviting.

Level One: Intentionally Disinviting

Acknowledging that some messages are meant to be disinviting is painful. Comments such as “Shut up” or “You never use your head” fit into this level. Professionals functioning at the intentionally disinviting level are

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aware of the disabling, demeaning, and devaluing potential of their behavior. Exactly why some few people choose to function at this bottom level is unclear. But regardless of the reasons—whether because of racial or gender prejudice, unrequited love, personal inadequacy, or negative self-image—if they are unable or unwilling to change, fellow professionals have the responsibility to caringly but firmly remove them from daily contact with students.

Fortunately, relatively few educators function at *Level One* for any extended period of time. Intentionally disinviting messages are usually communicated in fits of anger or frustration. Here is an extreme example provided by a student:

When I was in kindergarten, Mrs. Hall made me sit beside Ilmar. No one wanted to sit next to him because he smelled bad and always had a runny nose. One day he bit me on the arm. I told Mrs. Hall and she said if he did it again he would have to move. So JoLynn (my friend) said she would bite my arm (teeth marks for proof) and I could tell Mrs. Hall. When I showed Mrs. Hall my arm she became furious. She asked me if I wanted to bite Ilmar back. Of course I didn't, so she bit him on the arm.

A major problem with *Level One* behavior is that these intentionally disinviting actions tend to be justified by some individuals as being “good” for students. The authors of this book can think of no circumstances in which it is good to demean students or where a professional can justify intentionally disinviting behavior.

Another form of intentionally disinviting behavior is exhibited by the person who sends mixed, but predominantly disinviting messages. People who behave this way mean to be disinviting, but may alter their behavior when confronted. For example, in the movie *On Golden Pond*, Norman (Henry Fonda) often exhibited disinviting behaviors, but when confronted in a serious and persistent way, he was willing to change. Sometimes such confrontation can be beneficial to those involved. If intentionally disinviting messages in schools go unchallenged, then schools may move away from their primary function—to invite human potential. Educators who seek to operate from an inviting stance have a responsibility to keep their schools on task.

Level Two: Unintentionally Disinviting

A much larger problem in schools stems from the people, places, policies, programs, and processes that are unintentionally disinviting. Educators who operate at *Level Two* are typically well meaning, but their behavior is often seen by others as chauvinistic, racist, sexist, condescending, or simply thoughtless. Comments such as “What Earl is trying to say” and “It’s easy, anyone can do it” typify this level. Professionals who function at *Level Two* spend a lot of time wondering “What did I do wrong?” “Why aren’t my students learning more?” “Why is everyone so upset with me?”

Teaching that is unintentionally disinviting is often characterized by boredom, busywork, and insensitivity to feelings. Examples of such insensitivity appear again and again in student accounts of being disinvited: “I feel insulted when faculty sponsors always ask a female to take minutes,” wrote one girl. Another student described how she was disinvited by a teacher who said: “You can try out for the part . . . if you really want to.” A third student complained that the teacher always used the term “broken home” when he could just as easily have said “single-parent family.” Teacher behaviors perceived by students as sexist, racist, patronizing, or thoughtless are likely to be interpreted as disinviting despite the teacher’s good intentions.

Level Three: Unintentionally Inviting

Educators functioning at *Level Three* seem to have stumbled into particular ways of functioning that are usually effective, but they have a difficult time explaining why this is so. As good as they are, they usually lack a consistent stance from which to operate. Many so-called natural-born teachers, those who may never have thought much about what they are doing, but who are effective in the classroom, are successful because they are functioning at *Level Three*. They typically behave in ways that result in student feelings of being invited, although the teachers are largely unaware of the dynamics involved.

Professionals who function at *Level Three* are like the early “barnstorming” airplane pilots. These pioneer pilots didn’t know a lot about aerodynamics, weather patterns, or navigation. They flew by the “seats of

their pants.” As long as they stayed close to the ground and the weather was clear so they could follow the highways and railroad tracks, they did fine. When the weather turned ugly or night fell, however, they became disoriented and got lost. In difficult situations, they lacked a dependable guidance system.

The problem with functioning at the unintentionally inviting level is that the educator can become disoriented and unable to identify the reasons for his or her successes or failures. If whatever “it” is should stop working, the teacher does not know how to start it up again or what changes to make in his or her behavior. In other words, the teacher lacks a consistent stance—a dependable position from which to operate. A colleague, Charles Branch, once remarked that he would rather work with people who are functioning at *Level One* than those who are at *Level Three*. At least with *Level One* you know where you stand. The need for consistency and dependability in professional relationship sets the stage for *Level Four*.

Level Four: Intentionally Inviting

Educators should strive to be intentionally inviting. Doing so requires understanding the reasons for and the results of one’s behavior and having the desire to function in a dependably inviting manner. But even at this top level, some are more successful than others in their actions. Here are some possible reasons for degrees of success within the broad category of *Level Four*.

Educators who seek to be intentionally inviting, but who are uncertain about the process, are going through a transition period. (This transitional process is analyzed in the final chapter of this book.) They begin to understand the processes involved and make a conscious effort to be inviting. When they face difficult situations, however, they may resort to lower and perhaps more familiar levels of functioning. Students generally feel good about these beginning *Level Four* teachers, but may have a vague feeling that these teachers are not too dependable and can’t be counted on in tough situations. With experience and practice, teachers are likely to move successfully through this transition period. Educators who are dependable in their actions consistently face diverse and difficult

situations with a particular stance. The importance of consistency and dependability is illustrated in the following:

Stubborn Teacher

My teacher is so stubborn! She is told that I am unmotivated.

But she invites me anyway.

She is told that I don't want to learn.

She invites me anyway.

She is told that I don't have the ability.

She invites me anyway.

She is told I just want to cause trouble.

She invites me anyway.

She invites me again, and again, and again.

She fills my world with invitations.

One day, I'll take the greatest risk of my life.

I'll accept one, and see what happens.

When educators who are functioning at Level Four perceive, choose, and act with consistency and sensitivity, they are likely to become artfully inviting, a term first used by Tim Gerber, a colleague. At this point educators have integrated Level Four behaviors into what appears to be an effortless activity, but what is actually the product of serious and sustained effort. The process is similar to that gone through by someone who has worked to become fluent enough in a language to think and create in it. Artfully inviting educators think in a special language of “doing with” rather than “doing to.” They have developed the ability to approach even the most difficult situation in a professionally inviting manner. When educators who are functioning at this advanced level face problems, they can rely on their understanding of invitational education to develop solutions.

Educators functioning at *Level Four* are like modern jet pilots. Thanks to their knowledge, they can “fly on instruments” around or over dangerous weather fronts. In the final analysis, this ability to chart and maintain a dependable flight pattern makes the difference between success or failure as a professional helper.

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Recognition of the ability to be intentionally inviting and the artful use of this ability can be tremendous assets. By understanding the four levels of functioning, by seeking to function at the highest level, and by improving abilities within this level, educators can be powerful forces in inviting school success.

Summary

Invitational education requires the artful blending of teacher perceptions, stance, and behaviors. This involves viewing students and oneself as able, valuable, and responsible and having a positive view of the educative process. Teacher stance represents the teacher's disposition regarding trust, respect, optimism, and intentionality.

Chapter Three concluded with a simple classification procedure for evaluating personal and professional conduct: (a) intentionally disinviting, (b) unintentionally disinviting, (c) unintentionally inviting, (d) intentionally inviting. The next chapter presents the “craft” of invitational education, which includes being ready, doing with, following through, and the choices involved in the inviting approach.